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Attention: Michael Finley

November 10, 1989

NOV 15 1989

Dear Clifford Hawkes,

17500 REPLY

I am writing this letter in response to the Winter Use Plan and Alternative B of the DEIS for Yellowstone and Grand Teton National Parks.

I have lived in Yellowstone at Old Faithful, Grant, and Lake for six years and I am about to begin my fourth winter as a Bombardier Snowcoach Driver. In the winter I drive park roads on a regular basis and experience first hand a lot of the issues stemming from winter use.

I truly believe the plan to plow the road from West Yellowstone to Old Faithful is neither beneficial to the visitor or to the well being of the park. Plowing the road does not provide safer travel, in fact it could make travel more dangerous as sometimes maintaining the road for safe travel may be impossible. It also creates a dangerous situation for wildlife by building berms of snow that they may be unable to travel across. This is a hazard in the spring when roads are first plowed, Bison + elk become trapped on the road which is stressful enough - but becomes even worse when combined with traffic. Plowing the road does not improve the visitor experience; traveling through Yellowstone on snow-covered roads is a unique experience that should be preserved. Visitors packed onto buses with berms blocking their view and designated stopping areas would not make for a special Yellowstone experience.

I am not a fan of snowmobiles, but they do allow visitors to determine their own itinerary. I think stricter regulations

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could make snowmobile use considerably less detrimental to the park. Regulations such as limits on emissions and noise, and allowing only so many to enter the park per season or per day. I am concerned that plowing would only increase and concentrate snowmobile use in other areas of the park. By limiting snowmobile use, winter visitors could also make use of snowcoach tours. This is a great alternative. I drive a Bombardier snowcoach which carries 10 passengers (most van conversion snowcoaches carry 12-13 passengers). This is a great way to see the park, you are in a small group with a guide providing commentary. We make planned stops at major features but also have the flexibility to make additional stops along the route as requested. Because the group is small, it is easy for guests to feel comfortable asking questions. I have been able to go into great depth and have group discussions about a variety of topics concerning the park. ~~This is because we are small groups~~ Guests get comfortable with each other and ask questions, ~~enabling me to personalize the tour to their particular interests.~~ This greatly benefits the visitor in a few ways; they have a more enjoyable and personalized visit, as well it provides a great interpretive opportunity.

Another concern I have with plowing the West Yellowstone to Old Faithful route is the potential for increased visitation. Facilities in the park are already inadequate for the number

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of winter visitors. In particular, at Old Faithful, the Visitor Center, warming hut, Snowbedge dining areas, and parking lots are already overcrowded. If the number of visitors greatly increases, how will they be accommodated? Removing garbage and waste in the winter is an issue as well. Not to mention the impact of increased visitation on wildlife and natural features.

I have a few other concerns about Alternative B:

- * Why lengthen the winter season? Yellowstone needs a break from the heavy summer and winter visitation it receives. By closing the roads for about a month in the fall and spring, it gives the park (wildlife in particular) a break from so many visitors.
- * I also don't understand the need to add more motorized and non-motorized groomed trails. This results in the need for more areas to be patrolled and maintained. There is already adequate access to main features. Yellowstone is a wilderness and should remain so as much as possible.
- * Alternative B mentions limiting backcountry access in some areas to designated trails only - to protect geothermal areas and winter wildlife range. Looking at the map outlining these areas shows places that are clearly not geothermal or winter wildlife range (for example, south side of Grand Loop road at Old Faithful and Madison Plateau), yet visitors are limited to trails only. There are also areas limited to designated trail use only that receive so little use, is it necessary to restrict the very few who make the effort to reach these areas and explore the natural wonders they

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came to see (for example Hayden Valley and Heart Lake areas)? I also have concerns as to what a designated trail is? Many trails are not well marked with orange markers therefore making it difficult to remain on an exact trail. In the winter, even regularly used trails are broken and rebroken with many variations depending on who is doing the trail breaking.

Winter use in Yellowstone is a complex controversy. There are no easy answers and no plan will keep all interested parties happy. But, it is important to keep in perspective the true purpose of Yellowstone and its dual mission: "to preserve and protect" and "for the benefit and enjoyment of the people". I only hope a plan can be devised to keep both missions in balance. I have valid concerns and options outlined above, please consider my perspective in the decision making process.

Sincerely,
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MELISSA STRINGHAM	
Page 1. Comments in this letter are critical of alternative B. Attention to this alternative is a function of its designation in the DEIS as the preferred alternative. The preferred alternative will change in the FEIS. The impacts of alternative B are disclosed in the DEIS. It is the purpose of an EIS to disclose impacts; identification of impacts is not suitable rationale for changing or removing the alternative from the EIS.	
Page 1. The potential impacts of alternative B in regard to visitor experience and safety are disclosed in the DEIS on pages 203 and 217. The impacts on ungulates are disclosed on pages 208-210. NPS maintains that the plowing of the West Yellowstone to Old Faithful road segments represents a safer situation than currently exists. Unregulated use by large numbers of snowmobiles, piloted in many instances by novice riders, and snowcoaches amid the presence of wildlife is more hazardous than controlled and scheduled mass-transit traffic using trained and experienced drivers. On road segments that are less traveled, or less occupied by wildlife, snowmobile use continues in alternative B – this is status quo in terms of visitor experience and safety. Impact on scenic viewing and other aspects of visitor experience are discussed on pages 219-221 in the DEIS.	
Page 2. Concerns about how use in the park units might change as a result of alternative B are understandable. The impacts of redistributed use are discussed to a degree in the DEIS. The FEIS will provide a more quantified scenario of how use might change by alternative.	
Page 2. NPS is aware of the positive aspects of snowcoach travel, and agrees that for many people oversnow mass-transit access is a wonderful experience.	
Pages 2-3. The amount of use and its distribution under alternative B, from West Yellowstone to Old Faithful, would be more easily scheduled and controlled using mass transit systems. The DEIS illustrates that there is sufficient capability using such a system to replace the number of visitors who presently use this route and destination services via snowmobile.	
Pages 3-4. Winter wildlife habitat, and how the alternatives relate to it using trail designations or closures, will be clarified in the FEIS.	